

Early Learning Council Proposal to the Steering Committee

Five “Big Ideas”

Statement of Vision

The Early Learning Council proposes a major shift in how we think about education—from focusing first on institutions or systems to focusing on individual developmental needs and opportunities for all learners. Amazing new research on brain and psycho-social development, along with long-term economic research about the high rate of returns that accrue from investing in high quality early learning, put us in a great position to redesign the way we support parents, children and families during the “learning to learn years.”

The importance of such a redesign is underscored by a Washington State survey that found less than half of kindergarten students “school ready” according to kindergarten teachers.¹ Other research demonstrates that over the first four years of life, well-to-do children hear an astonishing 30 million more words than children from the poorest families.²

We believe the citizens of Washington State would be better served if we all understood that birth through ten years is when fundamental learning structures are developed in the human brain, and basic emotional and relationship skills are mastered.

We also believe that all human institutions benefit from focus and clear accountability for their work. In the interest of ensuring that every ten-year-old is a capable reader, writer, mathematician, artist, keyboarder, musician, creative thinker, and speaker of more than one language—and is a person who is empathetic, works well in groups, and lives with the rules—we need to make sure early learners are surrounded by a highly skilled cadre of people who are accountable and do what it takes to help children achieve mastery.

Ten years from now, Washington State will be world-renowned for its support of young children and families. In brief, all children in our state will be prepared from birth to succeed in school and life. To assist in this mission, we will have

¹ Pavelchek, Dave. (2005) *Student Readiness for Kindergarten: A Survey of Kindergarten Teachers in Washington State*, Washington State University.

² Hart, B. and Risley, T. (1995) *Meaningful Differences in Everyday Parenting and Intellectual Development in Young American Children*. Baltimore: Brookes.

the very best materials, including a web site translated into multiple languages, fed by the latest and best research from our universities that will allow new parents, grandparents, family, friends, and neighbors, and child care and early education programs find great support to their role in the first days, months and years of a child's life.

Full-time, high-quality, economically integrated early education and supports will be available to families who choose it regardless of their ability to pay. Services will address children's physical, cognitive and social-emotional development, and be provided free or at very low cost for families needing the most support. Services will be fee-based for other families. Family support and parental involvement will be hallmarks so that parents will be even more effective as their child's primary caregiver, advocate and teacher. Services for family, friend and neighbor caregivers will be widely available in multiple languages, and in comfortable, culturally relevant settings.

Special needs will be recognized and responded to early. This includes early identification of developmental problems and implementation of culturally appropriate interventions that are family and child-centered, research-based and delivered in natural settings. Our most vulnerable families and children will receive supports through programs such as Nurse-Family Partnerships and special priority for high quality comprehensive early learning programs including Early Head Start, Head Start and the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP).

By the time children are four years old, they will be enrolled in taxpayer-supported, full-day, full-year voluntary early learning. Because these opportunities will be year round and full day, there will be time for play, music, movement, art, and drama as well as the beginnings of other skills like reading, math, languages, and discovery-based science. Parents will be able to choose the best options for their children, with additional support offered to be effective consumers.

Most immediately, tools will be made available to parents and other caregivers including family, friend and neighbors, and other providers of early learning, to maximize early learning opportunities for young children. This will be an important first step toward ensuring that all four-year-olds receive the high quality early learning experiences that will prepare them to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Recognizing that we have a market failure with respect to the availability and accessibility of early learning, we will take a market-based approach that recognizes the vital role of increasing both the supply of early learning opportunities and the demand for such services and programs—all within the context of setting standards so that school readiness results and outcomes are measured and evaluated.

(1) Support Parents as Their Child’s First and Best Teachers

Description and Possible Strategies

Parents want their children to succeed in school and life. We must define school readiness and help parents and caregivers in their primary role as teachers. Every parent will have access to sustained, culturally-competent, linguistically appropriate support to help their children “learn to learn” throughout the first ten years of life. This will include a continuum of support from universal availability of parent education to more intensive supports for high-risk families. Services will be family-centered to support strong attachments and enhance child development.

- Institutionalize parent support as part of early learning by forming a permanent parent support advisory committee and taking steps to better understand the needs and priorities of parents.
- Parenting information (no wrong door) and supports will be available to parents including intensive supports for families struggling due to poverty or other risk factors.
- Information about the child care and early education licensing process, regulatory history, monitoring reports, and quality ratings will be transparent and readily available to parents through the internet and toll-free lines. Opportunities will be provided for parental input during the re-licensing process, program reviews and other means.
- When parents choose family, friend and neighbor care for their child, culturally relevant information and supports will be available to these caregivers.
- Parent and family engagement is the foundation upon which school success is built; and seamless connections between early intervention services, schools and other care and learning providers are critical. Moving toward a high quality “learning to learn” system requires: partnerships characterized by mutual respect and trust; parents and families who are empowered to help children succeed in school; schools and early learning providers who help

smooth transitions; new attitudes that are reflected in the beliefs and actions of early learning providers and educators; resource sharing; wider community collaborations that result in locally appropriate solutions; and child outcome and program assessment data that is used to continuously improve services.

- Define, assess and support school readiness.

(2) Refocus and Change Public Perceptions about Education for Children Birth Through Age Ten

Description and Possible Strategies

In collaboration with the Thrive by Five Partnership, and local partnerships such as the Business Partnership for Early Learning, the state will provide leadership to help parents, families, early learning providers, schools, communities and opinion leaders understand the importance of the first ten years as the “learning to learn” phase—and to begin refocusing and changing the landscape of education to achieve effective basic education for children.

This will include implementation of a public information campaign about the importance of high quality early learning. In addition, steps will be taken to improve safety, health and early learning outcomes for children through age ten in existing child care and early education settings, increase integration among early learning programs including schools, and implement “state-of-the-art” technology. Culturally responsive practices will be an integral part of improvement strategies, and children will be offered experiences that recognize their varying developmental trajectories and learning styles, and prepare them for life-long learning and success.

Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS): Clear expectations, supports and incentives are needed to increase the quality of services provided by existing child care, early education and school-age programs. Program ratings will provide parents and communities with information about the type and quality of programs available in their communities. The ultimate intent is to improve early learning outcomes for children. Participation in QRIS will be voluntary for early learning programs, but significant incentives and supports will make it attractive to the majority of providers.

- QRIS will include five levels (1-5) starting with compliance with licensing (or performance standards for Head Start and ECEAP) and program accreditation as the highest level. Improved quality will be addressed in five categories:

professional development; learning and curriculum based on what children need to know and be able to do when they enter kindergarten (linked to the redesigned benchmarks); parent and community partnerships; management practices; and program assessment.

- The system will be designed to continually improve the overall range of quality, not just to reward those providers who currently have a higher level of quality. Outreach and support to child care and early education programs in low-income communities will be particularly important in making sure that at-risk children and families have access to high quality programs.
- Documentation and self-assessment will be used to determine QRIS levels 1 and 2. This information will be supplemented by external quality assessment/observation for levels 3-5.
- Accountability for success will be built in at both the program level (through periodic monitoring and assessment) and at the state and community levels (to assess progress toward improved program quality and improved rates of school readiness).

Regulatory Reform: Regulation is the foundation for QRIS and establishes the minimum standard that all licensed child care and early education programs must meet. It needs to be changed to assure parent involvement, minimize risks for children, and support child care and early education programs in improving the health, safety and quality of their services. Regulation must be based on mutual respect among parents, state staff, and providers; involve cooperation among regulatory entities (to minimize competing requirements); be just and consistent while allowing for professional judgment; and include both positive and negative enforcement strategies. Specific strategies include:

- Regulations will be based on research, national benchmarks, peer states and review of statistical information. Rules must be written and organized so they are easy to understand for providers and parents with varying literacy levels.
- All licensed homes and centers will be monitored at least once a year—on an unannounced basis except on-site visits associated with re-licensing. Steps such as centralizing responsibility for background checks should help ensure timely processing of background checks and free licensors to devote more of their time to monitoring.
- All licensed child care centers and homes will be required to have liability insurance coverage.
- Subject to the availability of technology to facilitate timely processing, national fingerprint checks will be required for all licensees and child care workers.

- The Department of Early Learning will develop a plan for identification and registration of part-day preschools.
- Guidance, training, observations and the monitoring of concerns will be used to increase consistency in practice across regulatory personnel.
- The child care re-licensing process will include a comprehensive review of the provider including self-evaluation, monitoring, input from parents, and review of the provider's file with supervisor input.
- A clear system of progressive enforcement is needed. Providers will be supported in improving the quality of their services through QRIS and other means. Based on weighted regulations (depending on their importance to the health, safety, development, and well-being of children) thresholds for taking corrective action will be developed, e.g., fines, probation, revocation.

Improved Technology: State-of-the-art early learning, characterized by accessibility, transparency, accountability, and proven outcomes, requires a state of the art information system.

- To improve the health, safety, development and well-being of children in early learning programs, a state-of-the-art information system is required to ensure efficient use of staff time; track statistics on accidents, violations, and other indications of the need for rule changes; provide clear and specific historical information for parents; make more information available to providers; provide sound linkages between licensing and QRIS; track child outcomes for purposes of evaluation and program improvement; and track outcomes for QRIS and rates of school readiness. Existing systems should be inventoried for possible expansion and linkages.
- As much as possible, data on provider quality, costs and prices will be built into an integrated system. This can minimize the reporting burden, and maximize the utility of the data collected.

(3) Provide Fair, Sufficient and Stable Funding for Early Education

Description and Possible Strategies

A delivery system dependent largely on what parents can afford to pay results in child care and early education programs that often lack the resources to provide high quality services including workforce education, training and compensation. It also results in economic discrimination as a barrier to high quality early learning. As part of understanding "learning to learn" differently, leadership will

be provided about the need for increased public and private funding for high quality early learning services.

- Information will be provided to employers about ways they can support high quality early learning including workplace access to community-based referral lines and parenting information, dependent care assistance plans, and participation in local private-public partnerships.
- Funding will be provided to expand the availability of services such as Nurse-Family Partnerships for families needing intensive support.
- Costs associated with improved quality will be supported through means-based scholarships for low and moderate-income families. These scholarships will encourage parents to choose high quality child care and early education services by being worth more when parents use programs with higher QRIS ratings.*
- The existing infrastructure that supports quality in child care and early education programs including Child Care Resource and Referral Services, STARS (basic training required for licensure), scholarship programs, and the Career and Wage Ladder have suffered from lack of adequate and stable funding in recent years. These programs, established in state law, are critical to successful implementation of QRIS and need to receive adequate funding.*
- As a primary strategy for supporting improved quality in early learning programs, the state's purpose and intention to establish a statewide QRIS linked to Tiered Reimbursement will be established in statute. Funding will be sought to implement and evaluate QRIS in an array of communities across the state in FY 07-09. Implementation needs to include a full array of supports, quality payments, incentives and tiered reimbursement to cover the costs associated with providing higher quality services (including education and training-related expenses and increased compensation).*
- Assuming the current approach to reimbursing providers for the care of subsidized children, the state's basic reimbursement rates need to cover what providers charge their privately paying families. Further, the new Department of Early Learning should adapt subsidy policies to support continuity of care for children and minimize economic segregation of children. Particular consideration should be given to providing extended eligibility for young children receiving comprehensive services through Head Start and ECEAP to minimize disruptions when a parent's work status changes.
- The ECEAP current average rate per child is \$5,591 per year. This compares to an average of \$9,200 for Head Start. The ECEAP average level of funding per child needs to be increased to cover the costs associated with high quality comprehensive services.

- As an important strategy for improved quality in family, friend and neighbor care, funding will be sought in FY 07-09 to support voluntary supports and resources in an array of communities across the state.*
- The Early Learning Council supports the K-12 Advisory Committee recommendation that funding be provided to phase-in all-day kindergarten across the state.

* Budget projections for phased implementation will be addressed in the Access to High Quality Early Learning Study.

(4) Support Early Educator Professional Development, Compensation and Competency

Description and Possible Strategies

Research strongly links quality in child care and early education to the quality of the adult-child relationships. Quality relationships, in turn, are associated with staff qualifications and compensation. Staff in the “learn to learn phase” of education need to be culturally-competent and trained in the early years of human emotional and educational development. Their compensation should be commensurate with other professionals with equivalent levels of education. Ongoing professional development and training will, combined with reasonable pay and benefits, attract and retain competent staff and create stability so that children and families will have long-lasting relationships with early learning providers.

- Steps need to be taken to address the issue of provider/teacher preparation and certification. Certification of individuals working in early learning should be considered. In contrast to licensing, which is tied to a facility, certification would be awarded to an individual based on his or her education, experience and other qualifications. Such certification would be “portable” across changes in employers.
- Upgrading the professional development of early learning teachers will require a dramatic increase in Higher Education capacity including improved articulation between two and four year institutions and expanded availability of four-year early-learning degrees. Issues that need to be addressed include: 1) availability of classes during non-traditional hours and in rural communities; 2) availability of credits for community-based training; 3) transferability of early education credits across institutions of higher education; and 4) curriculum that is current and research based. Initial

phases of state investment should support rapid increases in these strategies statewide.

- For providers just embarking on early education professional development, and those choosing not to pursue advanced degrees, community-based training should be examined for capacity, relevance, and effectiveness.

(5) Build Community-Level Capacity in Support of the “Learning to Learn” Years

Description and Possible Strategies

All early learning happens at the local community level, and each community has strengths from which to build. While planning and implementation strategies may differ across communities—especially when it comes to inclusion and support to each child and family’s needs and cultural background—leadership from the state and the Thrive by Five Partnership can serve as the catalyst for the development of effective local partnerships and help communities achieve positive early learning outcomes despite variations in implementation.

Many communities across Washington State have already initiated community collaborations that include early care and education and school-age programs and build on local community infrastructure including child care resource and referral, community and technical colleges, four-year colleges and universities, public schools, health and safety networks, libraries, parks, youth serving organizations, health departments, and educational service districts.

Supportive relationships within local communities are essential to making early learning services, including early intervention, readily available to families and children. Public support and creative solutions will be further maximized if there is a local governance structure, capacity is built in a seamless way with what already exists, and financing partnerships are developed, e.g., local private-public partnerships.

- In support of “learning to learn,” communities will be encouraged to plan for how they will support parents, other caregivers and learners during the first eleven years of life. These planning processes will include parents and organizations focused on supporting parents and family, friend and neighbor caregivers. Community plans will address the availability of full-day, full-year high quality early education opportunities for all four-year-olds to ensure readiness for kindergarten. This will include strategies to extend and enrich

community partnerships among early care and education programs including child care, Head Start, ECEAP and school-operated early learning programs.

- Community collaboration is a necessary part of QRIS implementation—early QRIS implementation will include identification of communities that are interested and ready to serve as early implementers. Readiness could be identified by the availability of community infrastructure to support: 1) professional development through articulation from community-based training to college credits and degrees; and 2) support and assessment of early care and education programs that voluntarily enter QRIS. Evaluation of the process and outcomes from each of these initial communities will inform future phases of expansion of the QRIS to reach communities statewide.